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SUBJECT: GOI SEEKS LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL SUPPORT FOR
UNESCO-LED SAMARRA MOSQUE RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT

REF: 07 BAGHDAD 4127

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg S. D'Elia
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) PM Reconstruction Advisor Haq al-Hakim told us on February 7 that the GOI expects reconstruction on the Shia Golden Mosque of Samarra to be in full swing by October or November 2008. EmbOffs joined a delegation led by al-Hakim to Samarra in Salah ad Din (SaD) Province for February 6 meetings with the Samarra Technical Committee and Samarra Tribal Support Council. Also traveling with the delegation were UNESCO Iraq Country Director Mohammed Djelid, three UNESCO engineers, representatives from the Sunni and Shia Endowments, a Samarra Tribes representative, the Turkish contractor hired to rebuild the mosque, and Iraqi journalists. SaD Governor Hamood and Samarra Operations Command (SOC) Commander Major General (MG) Rasheed also met with the delegation and touted the many opportunities for urban renewal made possible by steady security gains in Samarra. MG Rasheed assessed that the city was 90 percent secure, and that Samarra residents had thwarted insurgent efforts to ignite a religious civil war. In separate meetings on February 7, al-Hakim discussed plans for providing security for construction workers, UNESCO representatives, and visiting media. Al-Hakim told EmbOffs that he considered the meeting outcomes satisfactory. In the course of the visit, Al-Hakim delivered a letter from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to Governor Hamood officially reinstating former Samarra Mayor Mahmoud Khalaf as Mayor of Samarra. End Summary.

PM Advisor on Reconstruction Meets
with Samarra Technical Committee and Tribal Support Council

2. (C) Prime Minister's Advisor on Reconstruction Haq al-Hakim led a delegation to Samarra in Salah ad Din (SaD) Province on February 6 to meet with members of the Samarra Technical Committee and the Samarra Tribal Support Council and survey the Shia Golden Mosque site. UNESCO Iraq Country Director Mohammed Djelid, three UNESCO engineers, representatives from the Sunni and Shia Endowments, a Samarra Tribes representative, the Turkish contractor hired to rebuild the mosque, and Iraqi journalists were part of the delegation. Governor Hamood and SOC Commander MG Rasheed met delegation members and accompanied them to the Golden Mosque, where they conducted a tour and discussed reconstruction plans and security arrangements with members of the Tribal Support Council.

SaD Governor: Reconstruction
Will Help Promote National Reconciliation

13. (SBU) Following the Mosque tour, the group adjourned to the Strategic Operations Center (SOC) in the nearby Samarra Green Zone. SaD Governor Hamood, followed by MG Rasheed, UNESCO Iraq Country Director Djelid, and former Samarra Mayor Mahmoud Khalaf, addressed news reporters and MNF-I and USM-I representatives. Governor Hamood recalled Samarra's "extraordinary situation" since 2004 when insurgents overran the city as well as the first bombing of the Shia Mosque in February 2006 that nearly ignited a religious civil war. He said insurgents had been determined to finish the job in June 2007, but that the residents of this predominant Sunni city had thwarted their plans because they "have seen the goals of al-Qaeda (AQI) and the foreign influence." Hamood concluded that the city's reconstruction efforts would help erase the city's recent "dark history" and thanked Coalition Forces (CF) for their assistance to rid the city of insurgents and improve the security situation.

UN Pledges Commitment to Reconstruction Efforts

14. (SBU) UNESCO Iraq Country Director Mohammed Djelid pledged the UN's continuing support for reconstruction efforts, noting how important Samarra and the Golden Mosque reconstruction are to national reconciliation. (Note: The UN - with a \$4 million contribution from the EU - is financing 50 percent of the project valued at \$16 million. UNESCO has overall technical responsibility for the project. End Note). He said that despite delays in the start of the project due to ongoing security concerns, and the many challenges that lie ahead, the UN remained committed to the project and would closely track its progress. He thanked the GoI and local sheikhs for their support of the project.

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MG Rasheed, Governor, and Former Mayor Tout Security Improvements and Hope for Economic Recovery

15. (SBU) Governor Hamood, MG Rasheed, and Mahmoud Khalaf, the former Mayor of Samarra who currently works with UNESCO, touted the opportunities the improved security environment present for urban renewal. Mahmoud encouraged the group to focus on reopening Bank Street, the market area adjacent to the Mosque that was closed following the first bombing in February 2006. Governor Hamood added that he has allocated funding in the 2008 budget to promote Samarra's economic recovery. MG Rasheed said with Samarra 90 percent secure, now is the time to provide assistance to Samarra residents, who have been waiting three years for this project and other forms of assistance.

Al-Hakim Meets Separately with Tribal Sheikhs and Sunni and Shia Endowment Representatives In Closed Meeting

16. (SBU) Al-Hakim did not attend the initial meeting in the SOC, but met separately with the Sunni and Shia Endowment representatives and the tribal sheiks at a nearby location. MG Rasheed, Mahmoud Kalaf, Governor Hamood, and UNESCO Country Director Djelid eventually joined al-Hakim at the other meeting site for an Iraqi-only meeting.

Mahmoud Khalaf Reinstated as Mayor of Samarra

17. (C) Al-Hakim told us that during the visit, he delivered a letter from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to Governor Hamood officially reinstating Mahmoud Khalaf as Major of Samarra. Al-Hakim said he was able to convince Governor Hamood to make the announcement to the Samarra Tribal Support Council. Al-Hakim said the Council responded positively throwing their support behind PM Maliki's decision to reappoint Mahmoud, who had previously been forced by the Samarra City Council to resign after refusing to reside

full-time in Samarra due to security concerns.

GoI Estimates Construction to Begin in October or November

¶18. (C) Al-Hakim also told us that the GoI expects reconstruction to begin in October or November following the conclusion of the site survey and delivery of construction materials and equipment. He said the three UNESCO engineers who traveled with the delegation to Samarra will remain on the ground for approximately one week to write an assessment and consider various proposals for erecting a tent that will cover the Mosque during reconstruction. PolOff spoke with Turkish contractor Ilyas Islam Ogloo who said the UNESCO engineers would submit their technical report to the GoI following their visit. The report is expected in one week. Al-Hakim said he would share a copy of the report with MNF-I and USM-I.

Security Remains Concern and Key to Reconstruction

¶19. (C) According to al-Hakim, due to time constraints the delegation's discussions only briefly touched on security arrangements for Samarra. Al-Hakim said the GoI is still reviewing several proposals for securing the route from the Samarra Green Zone to the Mosque (approximately 900 meters) to ensure the safe transport of workers, UNESCO representatives, and media representatives covering the project. He said the GoI has proposed to keep Bank Street, an area approximately 50 meters from the Mosque, open to traffic and business. Al-Hakim said that the GOI would focus on Bank Street development as the first phase of general reconstruction in Samarra. He emphasized that it was critical that the general economic recovery in this majority Sunni city must keep pace with the Shia Mosque's reconstruction in order to demonstrate GOI commitment to Samarra's overall economic development and national reconciliation. Al-Hakim said that the GOI is considering a proposal to wall off the route from the Green Zone to the Mosque site using T-walls, but will ensure that enough space remains to allow pedestrian access to businesses along the route.

Security Volunteers Come Forward to Protect Mosque

¶10. (C) Al-Hakim said that the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has vetted a list of 276 volunteers to work in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Samarra to provide security for Mosque reconstruction. He said there is a second list of approximately 400-500 volunteers who still need to be vetted.

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He felt that overall local support for reconstruction is incrementally improving.

Increasing Media Interest Presents Security Dilemma

¶11. (C) Although pleased with the increasing media interest in reconstruction efforts in Samarra, al-Hakim said he has concerns about ensuring the media's safety when they travel to Samarra. Afraid that media representatives present easy targets for insurgents, he asked EmbOffs for MNF-I assistance to transport media to and from Samarra. He also told us that the media have approached him about holding a media event in Samarra in March after workers have erected the protective tent over the Mosque. The February 6 meetings in Samarra drew extensive press coverage by both local Samarra and Baghdad media. Both Governor Hamood and al-Hakim were interviewed. Al-Hakim said that the event would be televised February 8, and that he would pass a copy of the footage to the Embassy.

Comment

(C) Al-Hakim expressed satisfaction with the results of the trip and said that it appeared the relationship between the GOI and provincial government is improving ever so slightly. He remains optimistic about the outcome in Samarra but still has reservations about the security environment and ensuring the safety of UNESCO experts, the Turkish contractor and workers, and visiting media who will be involved with or present when reconstruction goes into full swing. Al-Hakim did appear reassured after speaking to CF Officers residing and working in the battle space. CF officers also spoke with UNESCO Iraq Country Director Mohammed Djelid, who at first appeared alarmed by the high-level security presence, only to be reassured that security had greatly improved in the last six months. A remaining concern for al-Hakim is the level of security along route Tampa between Baghdad and Samarra, which presents challenges for the movement of equipment and people.

He said he felt there is adequate security in Samarra to move forward with the project and thanked EmbOffs for continuing MNF-I and USM-I assistance and support of reconstruction efforts. End Comment.

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